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What's in a Name? The Influence of Framing Obesity as a Disease on Weight Bias

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Background: The declaration of obesity as a chronic disease by the Canadian and American Medical Associations has been met with strong debate, including the potential impact of this declaration on weight bias.

Objective: The purpose of this research was to experimentally investigate the influence of framing obesity a disease on the attitudes of members of the general public.

Methods: Canadian and U.S. participants (N= 309, 15-73) recruited through CrowdFlower were assigned to read one of three articles. Two articles presented accurate and identical information about the nature of obesity, with one article stating that obesity has been declared a disease and the other article stating that obesity has not been declared a disease. The third article was a control article unrelated to obesity. Participants completed a number of questionnaires, including weight bias relevant outcome measures.

Results: Regression analyses revealed that framing obesity as a disease (vs. control conditions) was associated with more positive affect towards individuals with obesity, indirectly leading to less negative attitudes toward individuals with obesity. Further, for certain individuals framing obesity as a disease (vs. controls) was associated with perceptions that obesity is less personally controllable or higher empathy toward people with obesity, both of which predicted less negative attitudes.

Conclusions: Our results suggest that the declaration of calling obesity a disease can positively influence attitudes towards people with obesity and can inform future weight bias reduction interventions.